

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 24

An Accounting for the Vietnam MIAs? Remember Korea

By BILL PAUL

Tomorrow is National POW-MIA Recognition Day. In Alexandria, Va., relatives of the nearly 2,500 men still unaccounted for from the Vietnam War are holding their 16th annual meeting. For the first time since the war ended in 1975, they have reason to believe that their long ordeal may be almost over.

Two weeks ago, Vietnam said it wants "high level" talks aimed at resolving the MIA issue within two years. Secretary of State George P. Shultz responded that the U.S. is ready to work "promptly and decisively" with Vietnam. A formal announcement on the talks is expected shortly.

For years, the Reagan administration, based on the "information available to us," has operated on the "assumption that at least some Americans are still held captive," according to the Defense Department's official POW-MIA Fact Book. In testimony before Congress last month, Pentagon officials said they have 43 eyewitness accounts by refugees of live MIAs that appear to be true but still need corroboration. A few refugees have even passed polygraph tests, it was reported.

But in recent days, before the talks have even begun, both the New York Times and Newsweek have reported that U.S. officials very seriously doubt that any MIAs are still alive.

Why the apparent sudden shift in policy? Because it would be embarrassing to both sides if these talks led to the return of any remaining prisoners—Hanoi because it has long denied still having any, the U.S. because there would be questions about why the men didn't come home sooner. When faced with a similar situation after the Korean War, the Communists didn't account for all American missing, and the U.S. let them get away with it, despite solid evidence that some GIs were still held captive, even in the Soviet Union.

More than 8,000 Americans still are unaccounted for from the Korean War. In January 1954, five months after the cease-fire and the supposed return of all U.S. prisoners by the Communists, a Senate subcommittee reported that "several thousand American soldiers who have not been repatriated were victims of war crimes, died in action, or are presently confined behind the Iron Curtain."

On June 29, 1954, Rep. Thomas P. O'Neill Jr., now speaker of the House, entered into the Congressional Record a resolution from the Boston City Council that, Mr. O'Neill said, had his "unqualified endorsement." The resolution began, "Whereas 944 soldiers of the United States are now prisoners of the Chinese Commu-

nist forces in Korea, many of these men highly trained technicians skilled in the handling of the latest and highly secret instruments of war. . . ."

Today, in Camden, S.C., Steve Kiba, one of 11 American fliers whose plane was shot down just south of the Chinese-North Korean border and who were held prisoner by the Chinese for two years after the war (they figured in the 944), remembers the radar man on his ill-fated flight, Paul Van Voorhies. The U.S. lists Mr. Van Voorhies as killed in action. Mr. Kiba says he saw Mr. Van Voorhies at least a dozen times after the crash, including after the cease-fire, walking in the exercise yard of the prison they were in near Peking.

"He walked to within six feet of my prison cell," Mr. Kiba recalls. "He was in good physical condition." Yet when Mr. Kiba told American intelligence officials about Paul Van Voorhies, "They told me to forget about him and not to mention having seen him to anyone else."

Why would the Chinese have released everyone but Mr. Van Voorhies and the other radar man on the flight? Citing "U.S. intelligence officials," U.S. News & World Report said in December 1953 that the Communists "primarily wanted—and got—

Americans who could handle the sensitive and complex instruments of modern war such as radar, airborne and ground, and infrared instruments for night combat."

(A number of the missing in Vietnam had special technical training, including in nuclear weaponry.)

In North Palm Beach, Fla., retired Air Force intelligence officer O'Wighton Delk Simpson remembers the "Top Secret" report he sent to the Pentagon in 1955. As air attache in the U.S. consulate in Hong Kong, Mr. Simpson had just interrogated an emigre from China in his early 20s who was going to Australia.

The emigre told Mr. Simpson that he had been a railroad worker at Manchouli, on the Manchurian-Siberian border. Around the time of the cease-fire, a train heading north into Siberia stopped at Manchouli so workers could change the undercarriage. The emigre saw about 700 prisoners get off onto the platform. To be sure, he couldn't recognize English, but many of the prisoners were black, and the only blacks there would have been Americans, Mr. Simpson notes.

"I was convinced that [the emigre's story] was true," Mr. Simpson says. But, "as far as I know," U.S. intelligence officials never followed up on the report, he says. "I think the Pentagon sent it to the State Department, who sent it to our U.N. ambassador, who asked the Russian am-

bassador if it was true. You can imagine his answer."

For years, Mr. Simpson adds, he has tried to get someone in Washington to listen to his story. "It's like trying to punch holes in Jell-O," he says, adding that the trail might yet be warm, since the emigre could still be alive in Australia.

Last year, after taking the U.S. Army to court, Robert Dumas of Canterbury, Conn., brother of a Korean War MIA, finally succeeded in getting the U.S. to change the status of his brother, Roger, from MIA to POW after producing witnesses who said they had seen Roger in a Korean POW camp shortly before the cease-fire.

During the trial, dozens of official Army "data sheets" were discovered that showed that the U.S. had listed many GIs as "missing in action" when in fact they were prisoners of war who might well have been left behind when the shooting stopped. The data sheets show that these GIs were known to be POWs because other prisoners who were repatriated saw them in captivity.

Meanwhile, the North Koreans have never budged from their position that they have returned all U.S. prisoners. Periodically, the U.S. does seek information on American "missing," only to be rebuffed by the Koreans. Yet Gen. Eugene Tighe, who headed the Defense Intelligence Agency until his retirement in Sept. 1981, says, "I don't remember ever discussing Korean POWs" in the course of his duties in Washington.

Gen. Tighe says that, in his opinion, U.S. prisoners could come home from Southeast Asia in the next two years. But only if the U.S. starts "building leverage" with the Vietnamese, which it never did with the North Koreans. Gen. Tighe says the U.S. must emphatically say to Vietnam, "Sure, we'll restore diplomatic relations, and renew trade, and unfreeze your assets, and offer economic assistance, but only if you start telling us where the hell all those Americans are and arrange for their return."